SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Betty Anne Mounger Hays

Moderated by Amanda Lyons

Wednesday, October 12, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

LYONS: This is Amanda Lyons, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. This is Speak Now recording number 24. Today's date is October 12, 2011, and I have with me today Mrs. Betty Ann Mounger Hays, and she's here to share her memories of the Civil Rights Era. Thank you so much for coming.

HAYS: Thank you. My father, Dwyn Milton Mounger, was a Presbyterian preacher. And he came to Jackson, 1954 having been a preacher in Forest and Carthage, Mississippi, and then went back to Forest for another time. But he came to Jackson as Director of—Executive Director—for Central Mississippi Presbytery. At that time, the state was divided into three different sections, and Central Mississippi Presbytery was the Presbyterian governmental body for one third of our state. And then for the nation, the General Assembly was. But my daddy's job was to, to plant churches. And he would go into a subdivision and would hire people to help him survey the…people in the neighborhood to see how many Presbyterians were there, and then if there were enough people interested in having a new Presbyterian church, he would help them raise money to build it and would preach and be their first preacher and then help them to call a preacher. And he helped build Covenant Presbyterian Church, is probably one that you would know, and also Saint Paul, and then Westminster Presbyterian Church, which is now another denomination, it's out on, out near RTS Seminary on Capitol Street. But because he built churches, when the Civil Rights, when the Freedom Riders came and were meeting in churches and the churches began to be burned, it was a very hurtful thing to him. He said, "You might disagree with someone as to whether there should be integration, you might disagree as to whether the Civil—the Freedom Riders—ought to meet in churches, but you don't burn churches. Burning churches is absolutely wrong." And he was asked by J. Moody McDill, who was the preacher at Fondren Presbyterian Church at that time, to be a member of a committee called the Committee of Concern. And there were men from different denominations, but there was no Presbyterian preacher on that. And J. Moody McDill said that, that he could not become a member because it would split his church. The—they—had members in there that were in all the churches that were violently opposed to integration. In fact, at that time First Presbyterian Church had what they called the "color guard." And there was a policy, which they printed, that if Freedom Riders came into their church, that immediately, even if the preacher was in the middle of his sermon, he would announce a hymn, and everybody would stand up, and they would sing the hymn, while the deacons or ushers escorted the Freedom Riders out. Well, I heard daddy say that he thought that was wrong, too. The mentality was, "These people are demonstrating. They have not come to worship." And my daddy said, "Well, if you kept everybody from church who did not come to worship, then you would have a pretty empty church." So, anyhow, J. Moody McDill asked my father because he did not have a church, he was with the Presbytery at large, to

join the committee. And there were Catholic bishops on it. I think he said Gerow, Bishop Gerow, Bishop Brunini, and Bishop Allen. And there was Rabbi Nussbaum. And Rabbi, the Rabbi and my father had both been chaplains in World War II and were in the reserve army unit together and so Daddy knew him. And there were black people and white people on the committee, and it was, they raised over three hundred thousand dollars to rebuild the burned black churches and rebuild them in brick, which they said was less easily burned than the wood. And he said that one time during one of the Presbytery meetings, he…stood up and announced about the Committee of Concern and asked the Presbytery to help give money to rebuild the churches and that somebody stood up and made a motion to adjourn and it was seconded, and that stopped the meeting right there, and of course nobody discussed it. But…my father was told that he, he probably needed to move, that he would never do well here in central Mississippi, and so he went to the coast shortly before…Hurricane Camille came.

But I remember in the, I can't remember when it was, but I was living on Saint Mary in the Belhaven area, and my father was living a block and a half away, my father and mother, on Piedmont Street, 1821 Piedmont Street. And an FBI member came to my father's house, and he said, "We understand that you are next on the bombing list from the Ku Klux Klan." At that time they had had several of the bombings and I had personally felt two of them. We were on Saint Mary and the Katiskeys [sp] were on the other end, and they had entertained, let Freedom Riders spend the night at their house. And that blast nearly, it shook our whole house, it was really scary. And the FBI man said, "Would you like for us to keep a watch on your house? We'd be glad to, to watch out for you and ride around a lot." And my father said, "I don't think that's necessary." But then he and mother, mother was very scared, and daddy was scared enough to go to a pawn shop and buy a four-ten shotgun and load, and the shells, and load it and keep it loaded under his bed because his bed was, where he slept was only about a foot from the wall, my folk's bedroom was on the front of the house. And one night the, he heard a thud against the side of the house, and he grabbed the shotgun and went outside. And the, there was a poor little scared paper boy out there because instead of hitting the front porch as the paper boy usually did, he had thrown it and missed and hit the side of the wall by my daddy's bed. And he looked up after he went into the bushes to get the paper and then replace it on the front steps, and he looked up and there my daddy was standing over him with a shotgun.

My son was in the sixth grade when integration came to Jackson, Mississippi, and he was at Boyd School. And what they did, I was teaching at Duling School, and we had an all-white class, I had 36 children. And then after Christmas, we had, it took a whole month for them to reassign the students. And the teachers just sat in the teachers' break room; we had nothing to do for a whole month. And then when we started again, they took

half of our faculty and took it, scattered them all over Jackson and we got half black faculty in. And they did the same thing with the students. And that was extremely hard because we had children in every area of, every degree of learning. We had children…that nobody was at the same place in any of the books. It was just extremely hard, and every, that was a really hard, scary time. I taught at Duling School and later on found—after I started teaching there—found out that the sixth grade teacher who had been at the school the year before I taught, had been the teacher that rode with the Ku Klux Klan bomber and was in Meridian when he was planning to bomb a businessman over there, a Jewish businessman, and she was killed in the shootout with the FBI. And Tommy Tarrants, the bomber, was extremely, was wounded and jailed and later became a Christian after he was in jail, and became a preacher. So my son had a hard time in seventh grade because he went from Boyd Elementary School to Chastain and was one of the few white kids there. And he was small for his age, and the last week of school, after they had already had all their exams and he didn't have anymore classes, he came to me and he said, "Every day a group of black boys have been hitting me in the stomach and asking me for my lunch money." And I said, "Why didn't you tell me? I would have been right up there to, to see the principal." And he said, "That's why I didn't tell you." And I said, "What did you do?" And he said, "Well after a few days, I would hide my money in my shoe and tell them I didn't have any money." And he made it a point not to go in the restroom when only black boys were in there because there was the gang doing that. And one of his friends in the church was one of the few white girls at Bailey Junior High and her parents kept her in the school—public schools—as a matter of principle, and she was a blond and sorta buxom, and she had the trouble, when the classes would be dismissed and go from one class to another, someone in the hall had a pin and was sticking her in her breast, as she would go down the hall and she never could find out who it was. And so her parents went to the principal and they arranged that she would get out a few minutes before the bell rang, and she would have to go from one class to another by herself because it was very painful, that whoever was sticking, it may have been several people were doing that, but that was hard for them. But I always thought that if people, if the legislatures had obeyed the federal mandate and had done it class by class or in some reasonably, orderly way we could have done a better job of integration and it would've been more natural for the children.

LYONS: Sounds like it was very chaotic, everything changing.

HAYS: It was. It really was. So, but I'm sure we didn't…we didn't have the physical suffering as much.

LYONS: Did you ever consider putting your son in, like taking him out of the private—out of the public school?

HAYS: You know, I didn't. I was teaching in the public schools. And after I had taught in Duling for a year, we lost so many students that I had to be moved to a formerly black school. I was moved to G. N. Smith. And the way they picked my class was two weeks after school started, each other second grade teacher got to pick six children that she wanted to send out of her class, and that was my class, the six rejects from each class. And we had—I had some—I had a child that had been abused by her mother's boyfriend and she would stand up and throw her books at the wall with no provocation. And I had one little boy who had been beaten, and he would…it was really hard for him. I didn't, I had 36 children by myself with no assistant. And then after school, they, after Christmas, they got me an assistant and the little boy that was so and, had been beaten stabbed my assistant with his pencil one time while I was in the bathroom, so we had really…that was a hard situation, too.

LYONS: And going back to your father, I'm curious where, was he from Mississippi or?

HAYS: Yes, he was from Collins, Mississippi, and my grandfather, his father, was a lawyer, Milton Uriah Mounger. And he, my daddy used to tell the story that once he stood off a lynch mob in Collins. You know, back when he was a child the newspaper in Jackson would say there will be a lynching in Collins, Mississippi at 12 o'clock so and so, such and such a time, and people would come and bring their picnics, lunches. And there was a black man in the jail there one time and a lynch mob came and was gonna get him out and my grandfather and the sheriff stood off the lynch mob, and told them that they needed to let him be tried in court and not to do that. But my dad, as a young preacher, was sort of an Atticus Finch-like person in "To Kill a Mockingbird." While they were in Forest in the early thirties, they, a black man and his wife were at home, and a white man came drunk and there was some sort of alteration [altercation] and the black man shot the white man and killed him, and my daddy defended the black man because no lawyer in town would take the case. And they, he raised money to hire a lawyer since he was not a lawyer, and they finally got a man from a nearby town in Newton to come over, but he was a drunkard and so my daddy kept him at their house for, until he got sober and he knew that sober he could help 'em out. And daddy and the, the lawyer defended the black man and got life instead of death penalty. So that was, yeah, so he…

LYONS: He was a remarkable man.

HAYS: He was. I'm doing a family history, and I hope to give it to you all, a copy to you all. But I think that's about all I have.

LYONS: Well, thank you again for coming in today.

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